

Homily for September 7, 2004
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 35:4-7a

James 2:1-5

Mark 7:31-37

We have a claim on God's will to heal, to mend, and to make whole.

It is a touching story isn't it? That one about the deaf man with a speech impediment whom Jesus heals in such a concrete fashion amidst some privacy and spit and groans. "Ethphatha!" Jesus said, "Be opened!" It is so easy to dismiss that story as from another world and time.

But what is hard of hearing in us? What keeps our ears, minds, hearts closed? What impediments do we have?

Growing up in the southeastern United States, I took for granted that people of color sat in the back of the bus, used separate drinking fountains, and went to segregated restrooms. The printed signs on public places were everywhere telling us to do that. And I saw nothing wrong with it. I had to come north to go to school to begin to see and to hear people differently. It was as if somebody had touched my ears and my eyes, and amidst much groaning, somehow awakened my spirit to see and to hear justice for the first time.

And even upon returning home, I found it practically impossible to talk about such matters with my own family - with my brothers and my father and my mother - for our family went back before the Civil War. We were collectively quite blind and deaf.

Some months ago a mother was planning a birthday party for her six-year-old son. She wanted to protect him from the social consequences of inviting Jason, an unpopular child, to the party. Jason stuttered. He had a speech impediment, so he was constantly being teased, often cruelly.

But mom realized that her son had to make this decision on his own.

Mom was pleasantly surprised to discover that her son could not only take care of himself, but also stick up for his friend.

When other boys at the party started making fun of Jason, her son confronted them, saying: "He doesn't talk funny. You listen funny."

We often "listen funny." Fear and ignorance often distort our ability not only to hear, but to see the good in the midst of bad, the reasons to hope in the midst of despair. You see, we prefer the people in nice clothing instead of the folks threadbare, as the letter of James chapter two reminds us today. We can't even see straight.

The words Jesus speaks to the deaf man in today's gospel, Mark chapter seven, "Ephphatha!" - are spoken to us, as well: that our hearts and spirits be "opened" to accepting God's love from those who are "different" and "uncool"; that our hearts and spirits be "opened" to realizing God's presence in times and places that make us squirm; that our hearts and spirits be "opened" to realizing God's love despite our difficulty or inability to trust, to accept, to understand.

The wonderful healings narrated in this gospel do go on today - but through one another empowered by the spirit of the risen Lord, given to us by the Father in this holy sacrament, in response to our remembering and giving thanks for so great a gift.

**We have a claim on God's will to
heal, to mend, and to make whole.**